

Gaylord Diocesan Watch

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Concerned Catholics call for suspended whistle-blowing priest who complained of sexual harassment to be reinstated by Gaylord Bishop Steven Raica.

CADILLAC, Mich. (Feb 6, 2019) – A new activist group of Catholics in the Diocese of Gaylord is calling on Bishop Steven Raica to immediately reinstate a young priest he suspended in December as punishment for filing a complaint of sexual harassment against a top diocesan official, Vicar General Fr. Dennis Stilwell.

“A grave injustice has been inflicted by Bishop Raica against Fr. Matthew Cowan, a 33-year-old priest,” prominent retired ophthalmologist Dr. Richard Brenz, MD, stated during a press conference Wednesday in Cadillac hosted Gaylord Diocesan Watch (GDW), the new activist group.

“Bishop Raica admitted during a meeting attended by 400 parishioners at Cowan’s parish in Lake City, on Jan. 15 that he did not even talk to Fr. Cowan before suspending him and he is unwilling to admit that that he and his subordinates have terribly mishandled the investigation into the allegations and violated the rules of the diocese they are supposed to follow,” Brenz said.

“As virtually everyone today is aware, the leadership of the Catholic Church is incapable of abiding by its own rules and policies regarding sex abuse and harassment by priests, thus we are taking this case to

the media to defend Fr. Cowan, and in the hope of forcing real reform in the Gaylord chancery,” Brenz said.

“We respectfully are following the advice of Bishop Raica himself, who advised in a [letter to the faithful](#) on Aug. 15, 2018, following the Pennsylvania Grand Jury report: “Call us out when our behaviors or words do not correspond with the heart of Christ; and if you see suspicious activities by priests, religious, lay leaders or volunteers ...”

“We are posting documents on our web site, www.gaylordfaithfulnews.org, about the events that led to Bishop Raica’s suspension of Fr. Cowan, as well as updates on this situation.

“The Fr. Cowan situation is only one of several cases our group is researching at this time. In the future, we anticipate presenting information about other egregious violations of sex-abuse rules and regulations by Bishop Raica. For at least two years he has adamantly refused to acknowledge most letters to him and also refuses to rectify obvious scandals,” Brenz said.

“Our ultimate goal, of course, is to do our part to make a stronger and healthier Church, with excellent priests and bishops,” he added.

Below is a summary of what happened regarding Fr. Cowan according to our sources, which relies heavily on an email by Fr. Cowan sent to several diocesan officials on Dec. 19. Major parts of that email are accessible at this link: **SFX-Harrasment Overview** [Link to email file from Cowan].

Summer 2015

When the then 30-year-old priest came to St. Francis in the summer of 2015 for his new assignment, to be tutored by the elderly Fr. Stilwell, who is vicar general for the diocese, meaning he is the second-most-powerful official in the chancery, Fr. Stilwell insisted on giving the new priest a tour of his personal residence about 20 minutes from the church in the Boyne City/Charlevoix area.

“The tour included going into Fr. Stilwell’s bedroom, w/ a replica of [Michelangelo’s Adam](#) above his bed,” Fr. Cowan wrote in his email.

Over the next two weeks Fr. Cowan documented four instances of unwanted physical contact initiated by Fr. Stilwell in the presence of at least one other person. These included hugs, patting and rubbing his stomach and a slap on the butt.

Aug. 5, 2015

Fr. Cowan confronted Fr. Stilwell and told him “there will be problems if this happens again.”

Nevertheless, the harassment continued, Fr. Cowan wrote in his email: “various low back pats after this throughout the rest of the time there. I always kept my hand on my legs when driving in a car with him to avoid unwanted thigh pats.”

Summer 2018

Fr. Cowan explained in his email: “After the news of the homosexual misconduct by ex-Cardinal Theodore McCarrick in June of this year, followed by the release of the Pennsylvania Grand Jury Report in August of 2018, I realized that what happened to me by Fr. Stilwell was no longer an isolated incident or outlier in the Catholic Church. I then decided at the end of August to file a sexual misconduct allegation with the Diocese, asking them simply to deem the following to be credible or not.”

Late August 2018

Fr. Cowan filed a formal complaint of sexual harassment with the Diocese of Gaylord and included handwritten notes in a letter to the diocesan attorney with more explicit details than in the original complaint. These notes are in the Dec. 19 email by Fr. Cowan.

Fr. Cowan added that there multiple instances of the harassment, including “various low back pats after this throughout the rest of the time there. I always kept my hand on my legs when driving in a car with him to avoid unwanted thigh pat. If ever in a car with him again I always will.

“What started this again is reading Cardinal McCarrick’s response to harassment allegations being “I don’t recall that.” That’s exactly what Denny [Fr. Stilwell] told me when I confronted him.”

Sept. 12, 2018

Following phone calls to various diocesan officials in August, Fr. Cowan met with an investigator for the diocese who: "... told me his opinion that it is okay for [a] gay man to be a priest and that perhaps the Church should change its teaching about this. [He] said he decided to share this in order to know 'where he stood on this' I assume in order to establish rapport."

The investigator also asked Fr. Cowan if he was "homophobic."

Nov. 18, 2018

In response to an emailed complaint two days earlier to a chancery official in which Fr. Cowan complained that nothing was being done about his complaint, he was told the investigator wanted to conduct "one more interview with someone and then will submit a final report to the review board" and that he did not "anticipate a long wait one the final investigation report is complete; however that is just my impression."

Nov. 29, 2018

Fr. Cowan examined the formal policies of how complaints of sex-related issues are supposed to be handled and concluded the diocese was violating its own standards, perhaps running the clock out until the aged accused priest would retire sometime soon in the following year.

Dec. 10, 2018

Fr. Cowan was again informed by a chancery official the investigation was not yet complete, as "one more interview" was needed to be conducted.

Dec. 19, 2018

Exasperated that the investigation into the complaint had dragged on into a fourth month and the accused priest had not been temporarily removed from ministry while the investigation was being conducted, Fr. Cowan sent copies of his emails regarding the situation to several chancery staffers. This email got the attention of Bishop Raica, who had done nothing about the complaint since he was formally informed of it in August.

Jan 7-13, 2018

Parishioners learn Fr. Cowan is suspended by Bishop Raica and has left the area to live with relatives elsewhere in the diocese.

Jan 15, 2019

Bishop Raica spoke at a meeting to discuss the suspension of Fr. Cowan at St. Stephen Church, where Fr. Cowan was stationed previously. About 400 people attended. Citing the idea that “we are all family,” the bishop asked that the meeting not be recorded. However, it was recorded and it is posted on GDW’s web site. [LINK TO AUDIO RECORDING OF RAICA TALK]

During the one-hour, 36-minute meeting Bishop Raica explained that Fr. Matthew was suspended because he had revealed confidential information about his complaint as well as correspondence from the chancery he had no right to reveal.

Bishop Raica (at the 1-hour, 11-minute mark in the recording of his talk at St. Stephen) said: “... I do not stop people from sending emails but must know if emails are not respectful **or one is going against unity of the presbyterate of the diocese, there may be consequences.**” (emphasis added.) Many considered this comment a threat.

Brenz ended the press conference by stating: “The consequences of Bishop Raica neither respecting his own boilerplate apology for the corruption in the Church he issued in his [Aug. 15 letter after the Pennsylvania Grand Jury Report](#), is the potential permanent loss of not only an outstanding young priest, but also the shredding of any credibility he has regarding predatory behavior by powerful older priests against younger priests on his watch.

UNANSWERED QUESTIONS

Below are only a few questions we have been unable to get answered by Bishop Raica, as he is not known to personally respond to inquiries. His staff responds, but only occasionally to letters from the laity, typically with

meaningless, boilerplate platitudes. At the Jan 15 meeting, Bishop Raica opened the Q&A session by stating he would take written questions and respond to all of them. However, after the questions were placed in a basket, he seemed to carefully select which ones to read aloud. He declined to answer some of them and gave half-answers to others.

Several chancery and parish staff were present at that meeting. Notably absent was Fr. Cowan himself. Additionally, virtually nobody outside of St. Stephen Parish were aware of the meeting before it took place, otherwise we suspect there would have been double, triple or quadruple the number of faithful attending who are deeply upset at the injustice dealt to Fr. Cowan.

We hope the media will assist by getting answers to these questions:

- 1) There were witnesses to the behavior Fr. Cowan listed in his complaint of sexual harassment that was formally presented to the Diocese of Gaylord in August, thus is hard to deny the events took place. Fr. Stilwell told a parishioner at St. Francis he had been “exonerated.” Does this mean the Review Board is denying the repeated unwanted physical contact by Fr. Stilwell ever took place? We would like to see the final report of the completed investigation.
- 2) If there was an investigation, why was Fr. Stilwell not relieved of ministry during the investigation, as stipulated on the diocesan web site as the mandated procedure?
- 3) Bishop Raica on Jan. 15 said he had not contacted Fr. Cowan personally, yet he said “we are family” and spoke of unity and of the respect he has for his 40 active priests in a diocese of 75 parishes. His claim that young priests who come to work under the two-year tutelage program at St. Francis are not “B-List priests” rings hollow.
- 4) Does Bishop Raica recognize what so many others see so plainly: The young priest, Fr. Cowan, who took the risk of complaining about obvious grooming behavior by Fr. Stilwell, a much older and all-powerful superior, was summarily suspended for complaining too loudly while the accused remained in good standing throughout the process? How does this square with the gist of Bishop Raica’s letter to the faithful of Aug. 15?

Fr. Cowan is represented by a canon lawyer and has indicated that neither he nor his lawyers will comment publicly about this situation.

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